DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 442 565 PS 028 647

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TITLE Adolescent Parent Relationships and Academic Performance.
PUB DATE 2000-04-00
NOTE 11p.; Paper presented at the Biennial Meeting of the Society for Research on Adolescence (Chicago, IL, April 2000).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research (143) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Academic Achievement; *Adolescents; Grade 10; Grade 7; *Parent Child Relationship; Parent Influence; Parent Student Relationship; *Performance Factors; Predictor Variables; Secondary Education; Secondary School Students
IDENTIFIERS Emotions

ABSTRACT

This study examined associations between parent-child relationships and adolescents' academic performance. Adolescents in 7th and 10th grade completed self-report questionnaires assessing 6 features of parent-adolescent relationships: time spent together, number of activities, degree of influence, frequency of experiencing positive emotions, negative emotions, and subjective closeness. Academic performance was assessed with school grades and self-report measures of academic functioning and academic motivation. Findings indicated that seventh-graders had higher academic performance than tenth-graders and had relationships with parents that involved more time, activities, influences, and positive emotions. Parent-adolescent relationship features predicted academic performance in the tenth-grade sample but not in the seventh-grade sample. The strongest predictors of tenth-graders' academic performance were the degree of influence and the frequency of experiencing negative emotions in relationships with mothers. The findings suggest that multidimensional measures of parent-adolescent relationship features may be useful for improving understanding of parents' role in adolescents' academic performance. (Contains 11 references.) (Author/HTH)

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Adolescent Parent Relationships and Academic Performance

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Poster presented at the Biennial Meeting of the Society for Research on Adolescence,
April 2000, Chicago, Illinois

ED 442 565

ABSTRACT

Associations were examined between parent-child relationships and adolescents' academic performance. Adolescents in seventh (N = 64) and tenth grade (N = 43) completed self-report questionnaires assessing six features of parent-adolescent relationships: time spent together, number of activities, degree of influence, frequency of experiencing positive and negative emotions, and subjective closeness. Academic performance was assessed with school grades and self-report measures of academic functioning and academic motivation. Seventh-graders had higher academic performance than tenth-graders and had relationships with parents that involved more time, activities, influence, and positive emotions. Parent-adolescent relationship features predicted academic performance in the tenth-grade sample but not in the seventh-grade sample. The strongest predictors of tenth-graders' academic performance were the degree of influence and the frequency of experiencing negative emotions in relationships with mothers. The findings suggest that multidimensional measures of parent-adolescent relationship features may be useful for improving understanding of parents' role in adolescents' academic performance.

INTRODUCTION

The quality of parent-child relationships has long been recognized as an important predictor of adolescents' academic performance. Parental warmth and the closeness of the parent-child relationship are widely recognized as factors that contribute to school achievement (e.g., Paulson, 1994; Wood, Chapin, & Hannah, 1988). Defining relationship closeness is problematic, however. Past researchers have generally defined close relationships as "happy" relationships, characterized by intimacy (e.g., Buchanan, Maccoby, and Dornbusch, 1991; Buhrmeser, 1990), or measured with a single item question such as, "How close do you feel to your mother?" (e.g., Bell and Avery, 1985). However, these measures fail to include many highly interconnected relationships with large amounts of bidirectional influence (Berscheid, Snyder and Omoto, 1989). Relationship closeness has also been conceptualized as the interdependency of relationship partners (Kelly et al., 1983). That is, the frequency of interaction, the variety of activities, and the degree of influence in the relationship. In light of these differing operationalizations of the concept of closeness, we identified six different features of parent-adolescent relationships (time, activities, influence, positive emotions, negative emotions, and subjective closeness) for study. The purpose of this study was to determine which features of parent-adolescent relationships best predict adolescents' academic performance.

Between early and middle adolescence, many features of parent-child relationships change. For example, adolescents report less closeness, fewer expressions of positive emotions, and more expressions of negative emotions in their relationships with parents as they increase in age (Montemayor, Eberly, & Flannery, 1993; Papini, Roggman, & Anderson, 1991). During the same time period, there are also changes in adolescents' academic performance. Adolescents' interest in school declines, academic motivation decreases, and academic achievement drops after reaching secondary school (Eccles et al., 1993). Because there are age-related changes in both parent-adolescent relationships and adolescents' academic performance, we hypothesized that the nature and/or strength of the association between these constructs may differ at different points in adolescence. To test this hypothesis, we included both early adolescents (seventh-graders) and middle adolescents (tenth-graders) in our sample. Our first goal was to compare the features of parent-adolescent relationships and the academic performance of early adolescents with middle adolescents. Our second goal was to determine which features of the parent-adolescent relationship best predict academic performance at each age.

METHOD

Participants

- 64 seventh-grade (35 male, 29 female) adolescents
- 43 tenth-grade (15 male, 28 female) adolescents

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Measures

Academic Performance

- Grades (GPA) - the average of adolescents' most recent grades in social studies, math, English, and natural science courses.
- Academic Functioning - the average of 15-items pertaining to adolescents' perceptions of their academic engagement and school related efficacy.

  Examples:
  - I usually finish my homework.
  - Grades are very important to me.
  - I do well in school even in hard subjects.
  - I feel very close to at least one of my teachers.
- Academic Motivation - the average response to five vignettes of hypothetical school dilemmas.

  For example:

  One of the most popular rock groups is coming to town to give one performance. Caroline has eagerly awaited their visit and has already purchased her ticket. Then she learns that the concert is on the night before a big exam. She doesn't feel prepared for the exam and she has been having difficulty with the subject. Because of other commitments, the night of the concert will be the only time she can study.

  Adolescents were asked decide (on a scale from 0 to 10) what they think the student in the vignette should do.

Relationship Features

- Time - the average amount of time per week spent alone with each parent.
- Activities - the number of different activities (from a list of 36 common activities) that adolescents engaged in alone with each parent during the past week.

  Examples:
  - fixed a meal
  - worked on homework
  - went for a walk
  - listened to music
- Influence – the average rating of the degree to which each parent influences 45 different domains of the adolescents' lives.

  Examples:
  - my beliefs and morals
  - how I feel about myself
  - how well I do in school
  - whether I use drugs

  Adolescents responded on a scale of 1 (not at all) to 5 (a great extent).
- Positive Emotions - the frequency during the past week with which adolescents experienced 6 positive emotions in their relationship with each parent.

  The emotions were:
  - happy
  - satisfied
  - excited
  - cared for
  - calm
  - cheerful

  Adolescents responded on a scale of 1 (never or almost never) to 5 (almost always).
- Negative Emotions - the frequency during the past week with which adolescents experienced 13 negative emotions in their relationship with each parent.

  The emotions were:
  - angry
  - depressed
  - frustrated
  - rejected
  - lonely
  - jealous
  - sad
  - upset
  - worried
  - irritated
  - disappointed
  - afraid
  - embarrassed

  Adolescents responded on a scale of 1 (never or almost never) to 5 (almost always).
- Subjective Closeness - ratings of adolescents' feelings of closeness with each parent compared to 1) their other relationships and 2) their friends' parent-adolescent relationships. Adolescents responded on a scale of 1 (not close at all) to 5 (very close).

RESULTS

Grade Differences in Academic Performance and Relationship Features

- Seventh-graders had higher grades, higher scores of academic functioning, and greater academic motivation than tenth-graders. (See Figure 1).
- Seventh-graders reported more time, activities, influence, and positive emotions in their relationships with both mothers and fathers than tenth-graders. (See Figure 2). The two groups did not differ in subjective closeness or experiences of negative emotions in relationships with parents.

Relationship Features as Predictors of Academic Performance

- Relationship features were more strongly correlated with academic performance in the tenth grade than in the seventh grade. (See Table 1.)
- Separate stepwise regression analyses were conducted with the seventh- and tenth-grade samples. All relationship features were included as predictors, with grades, academic functioning, and academic motivation as criterions. There were no significant predictors of academic performance in the seventh-grade sample. Among tenth-graders:
  - Negative emotions in relationships with mothers was the sole predictor of adolescents' grades, accounting for 28% of the variance. (See Table 2.)
  - Influence and negative emotions in relationship with mothers emerged as significant predictors of academic functioning, together accounting for 47% of the variance. (See Table 3).
  - Influence from mothers was the sole predictor of academic motivation, accounting for 22% of the variance. (See Table 4).

DISCUSSION

- Tenth-graders reported less time, fewer activities, less influence, and less frequent experiences of positive emotions in their relationships with parents than seventh-graders. These findings are consistent with previous studies (e.g., Papini, Roggman, & Anderson, 1991), and probably reflect adolescents' increasing autonomy as they strive to individuate from their families and form their own identities.

- Our results indicated lower academic performance in the tenth-grade sample than the seventh-grade sample. This finding may reflect an increasing mismatch between the characteristics of secondary schools and the developmental needs of adolescents. Secondary schools tend to be larger, less personal, and more controlling than elementary schools (Eccles et al., 1993). According to Urdan et al. (1995), junior high and high schools do not meet adolescents' needs for autonomy, intimacy, and intellectual challenge. As these needs increase between early and middle adolescence, students whose needs are not being met may be increasingly likely to develop poor attitudes toward school.

- Although features of parent-adolescent relationships were significant correlates and predictors of academic performance in the tenth-grade sample, relationship features were not predictive of seventh-graders' academic performance. This finding was unexpected and is inconsistent with a large body of research suggesting that warm, close relationships are associated with academic performance for both children and adolescents (e.g., Paulson, 1994; Wood, Chapin, & Hannah, 1988). It is not clear why parent-adolescent relationships would play a larger role in the academic success of middle adolescents than of early adolescents. Additional research on the correlates and predictors of academic achievement during early adolescence is needed.

- Our results point to the significance of relationships with mothers in predicting academic performance, at least among tenth-graders. This finding is consistent with previous research (e.g., Paulson, 1994), and is probably related to the well-established finding that mothers are more involved in their children's lives than are fathers (Youniss & Smollar, 1985).

- Mothers' influence predicted adolescents' academic motivation and academic functioning, and negative emotions in relationships with mothers predicted adolescents' grades and academic functioning. High levels of influence from mothers may be a reflection of firm control. Negative emotions in relationships with mothers may indicate lower levels of parental warmth. Firm control and warmth are both dimensions of authoritative parenting (Baumrind (1971), which has been linked to children's academic achievement (Lamborn, 1991).

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- As in previous studies (e g , Paulson, 1994, Wood, Chapin, & Hannah, 1988), we found that subjective closeness and positive emotions in parent-adolescent relationships were correlated with academic performance (among tenth-graders). However, these relationship features did not account for any variance in academic performance once the effects of influence and negative emotions in relationships with mothers had been factored out. These results suggests that, to understand parents' role in adolescents' academic performance, multidimensional measures of relationship closeness may be more useful than measures focusing on a single dimension such as warmth.

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Table 2 – Relationship Features as Predictors of Tenth-Grade Adolescents' Grades

Predictors	β	Adjusted R^2
Entered Variables		28
Negative Emotions (Mothers)	55***	
Excluded Variables		
Time (Mothers)	12	
Activities (Mothers)	14	
Influence (Mothers)	28	
Positive Emotions (Mothers)	21	
Subjective Closeness (Mothers)	03	
Time (Fathers)	-02	
Activities (Fathers)	23	
Influence (Fathers)	14	
Positive Emotions (Fathers)	06	
Negative Emotions (Fathers)	28	
Subjective Closeness (Fathers)	-07	

Notes: Decimal points omitted. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

Table 3 – Relationship Features as Predictors of Tenth-Grade Adolescents' Academic Functioning

Predictors	β	Adjusted R^2
Entered Variables		47
Influence (Mothers)	52***	
Negative Emotions (Mothers)	-36**	
Excluded Variables		
Time (Mothers)	03	
Activities (Mothers)	14	
Positive Emotions (Mothers)	00	
Subjective Closeness (Mothers)	24	
Time (Fathers)	18	
Activities (Fathers)	23	
Influence (Fathers)	-03	
Positive Emotions (Fathers)	20	
Negative Emotions (Fathers)	-10	
Subjective Closeness (Fathers)	13	

Notes: Decimal points omitted. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

Predictors	β	Adjusted R^2
		22
Entered Variables		
Influence (Mothers)	50**	
Excluded Variables		
Time (Mothers)	07	
Activities (Mothers)	17	
Positive Emotions (Mothers)	09	
Negative Emotions (Mothers)	12	
Subjective Closeness (Mothers)	-10	
Time (Fathers)	09	
Activities (Fathers)	20	
Influence (Fathers)	-07	
Positive Emotions (Fathers)	-05	
Negative Emotions (Fathers)	07	
Subjective Closeness (Fathers)	-04	

Notes: Decimal points omitted. * $p < .05$, ** $p < .01$, *** $p < .001$

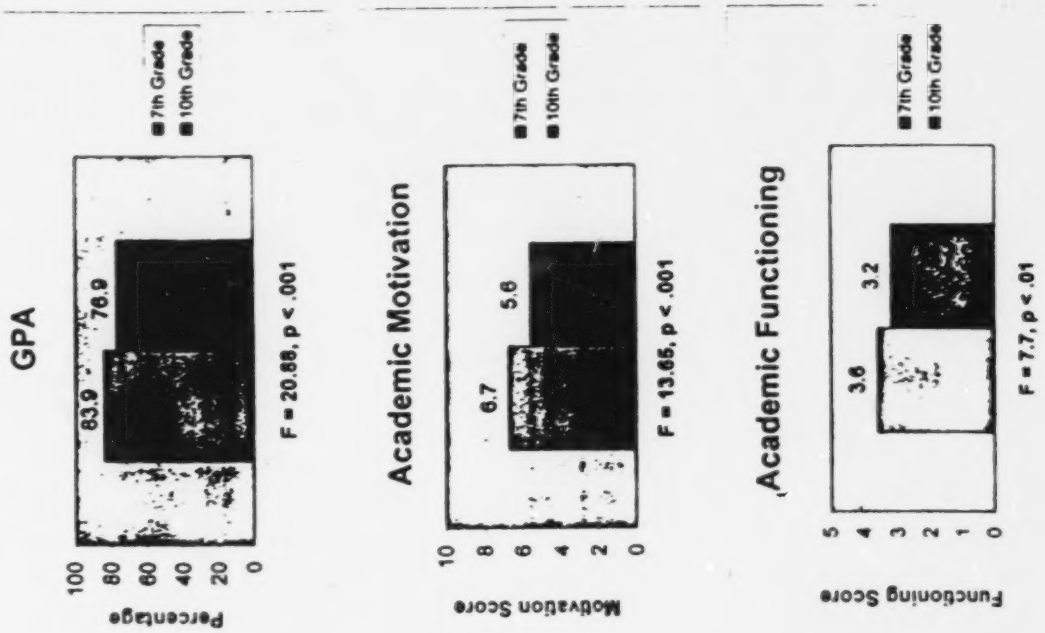

Figure 1. Grade Differences in Adolescents' Academic Performance

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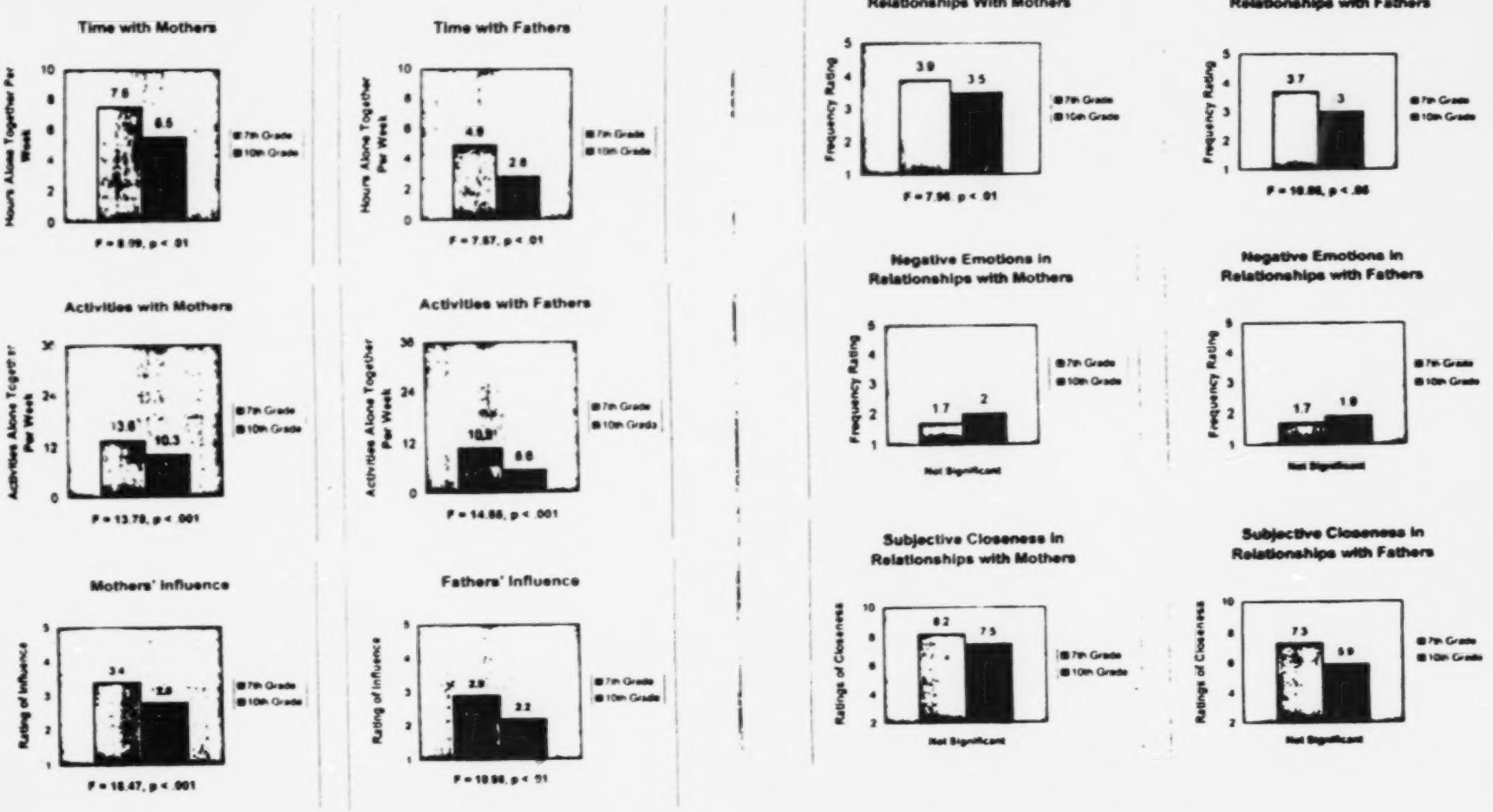
Table 1 - Intercorrelations Between Relationship Features and Adolescents' Academic Performance

	Seventh Grade (N = 64)			Tenth Grade (N = 43)		
	Grades	Academic Functioning	Academic Motivation	Grades	Academic Functioning	Academic Motivation
Relationship Features						
Time (Mothers)	-22	01	00	24	32*	31*
Activities (Mothers	-04	12	11	26*	38*	42**
Influence (Mothers)	05	17	14	40**	59**	47**
Positive Emotions (Mothers)	15	17	03	47**	47**	36*
Negative Emotions (Mothers)	-19	-13	-17	-56**	-47*	-01
Subjective Closeness (Mothers)	04	01	-06	22	49**	27
Time (Fathers)	-10	-15	09	13	33*	10
Activities (Fathers)	-05	12	26*	39**	49**	27
Influence (Fathers)	00	15	23	30	44**	19
Positive Emotions (Fathers)	06	14	10	35*	53**	17
Negative Emotions (Fathers)	-21	-18	-10	-15	-36*	-04
Subjective Closeness (Fathers)	22	23	13	-14	34*	06

Notes: Decimal points omitted. * $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$

Figure 2. Grade Differences for Features of Parent-Adolescent Relationships



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